WHAT ABOUT BLINDNESS IN OUR
STATE
NEW YORK

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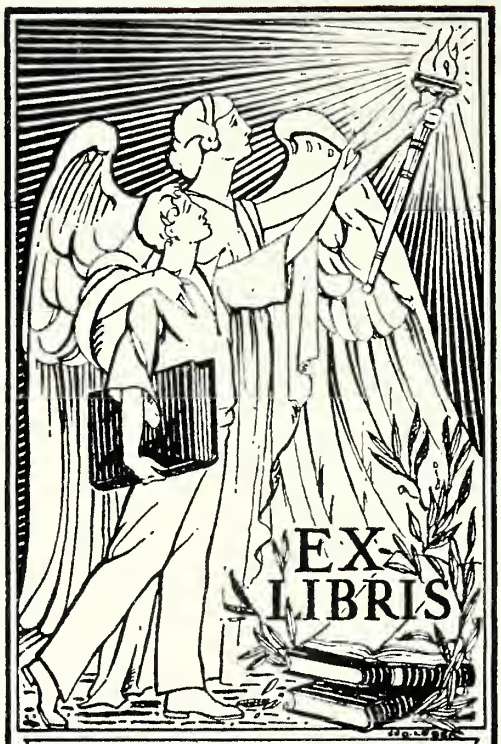

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STATE OF NEW YORK

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WHAT ABOUT BLINDNESS IN OUR STATE?

Who are the blind

Are they men or women, are they old or young? What causes their blindness? Is it a result of accident, disease, or injury at birth? Are they employed or unemployed? Are they married, do they have families, or are they single? Are they planning their lives with an adjustment to their handicap? What do they do and what are their attainments? These questions and many more are asked from time to time.

Study of 5,051 cases

An analysis of 5,051 cases answers some of these questions which the layman presents. Adequate eye reports for this group were received at the New York State Commission for the Blind during the years 1946, 1947, and 1948. The records represent names of blind persons newly referred to the Commission.

Reporting of blindness

It is the legal responsibility of the Commission for the Blind to maintain a register of the blind in the State. An amendment to the law, mandating the reporting of blindness became effective in 1946. Thus it is the duty of every health and social agency, attending or consulting physician or nurse to report to the State Commission for the Blind the names of all blind persons. This amendment strengthens the function of the Commission, yet, since the law carries no penalty for failure to execute it is reasonable to suppose that not all of the blind are even now being reported.

Definition of blindness

One must realize first, that blindness in this State does not necessarily constitute a total loss of sight. The law defines the condition as "20/200 with correction in the better eye or where loss of vision is due wholly or in part to impairment of field vision." In illustration, a person with defective sight in both eyes, is considered blind when his better eye cannot be improved with glasses to more than 20/200 visual acuity. The second part of the definition of blindness refers to "impairment of field vision." As an example, central visual acuity may be normal, or in any event not reduced to 20/200 (the point of legal blindness), but side, or peripheral sight, may be lacking. The loss of peripheral vision may be slight or it may include practically all of the field of vision so that the amount of visual acuity which remains is central only. When this occurs, vision is said to be tubular or telescopic. With New York State's definition of blindness made clear, the question arises: How many persons are totally blind and how many have residual vision which may aid in their rehabilitation?

The register of the blind at the close of 1948 contained 18,309 names. This figure included 5,051 names for which adequate eye reports were obtained during the years 1946, 1947, and 1948. These were isolated for review because complete medical information was available for a unit of study.

Where do the blind live

The ratio of blindness to the sighted population reported in Upstate New York was seen to be 2 persons to every 10,000, whereas in Greater New York 4 cases were found in every 10,000 of sighted population. This points to a higher proportion of blindness in the metropolitan area. It must be remembered, however, that the availability of eye clinics in Greater New York may lead to more complete reporting of blindness.

We found that only 450, or 9 per cent, live in rural areas. The reason for this is not known. It is an accepted fact, though, that life in the country is less wearing than life in the city. Those living in the wide open spaces are not called upon as frequently as urban dwellers to apply their eyes to close, detailed work. Out-of-door interests consume their time. Since close use of the eyes is not involved in these pursuits, they may be either unaware of, or not troubled by, a decreasing ability to see small, fine, objects clearly.

The very existence of the city resident, on the contrary, is linked with the need for sharp sight. His life is attuned to the printed word, which requires quick, ready vision. To earn his living, the urbanite finds that good sight pays. The pace of city living demands split second reaction. Keen visual discrimination is needed, else time and money are lost. Hence the man in the city strives constantly to keep his physical condition up to par. With medical facilities easily at hand, he finds it relatively simple to secure medical attention. This contrast seems to be one of the fundamental reasons for the greater amount of known blindness among the urban population.

Age groups of the blind

Blindness is no respector of age. Although it is not common to childhood, blindness can and does occur at birth and throughout life.

During the period of this three year Study, 236 blind children under 7 years were reported to the Commission for the Blind. Between 7 and 17 years of age the incidence of loss of sight fell off considerably; only 163 cases were reported for this age group. A gradual increase in blindness was shown during the older years; yet, nearly half of all cases reported were 65 years of age or older at the time of referral.

The fact that 236 children from birth to 7 years were blind seems to indicate a rise in congenital eye conditions. Increase in the rate of blindness after 17 years of age may be accounted for by industrial accidents. Likewise, a part of this group were veterans of World War II. After 50 years of age, when most blindness occurs, the degenerative diseases were responsible for much loss of sight.

Male or Female

Blindness almost paralleled the sexes. Among the total number of cases studied, there was only a slight difference between male and female. Yet a careful scrutiny of the records brought out the fact that females retained their vision to an older age than males.

In infancy and childhood, blindness among boys exceeded that of girls by 39 per cent. It is not possible to account for the greater amount of blindness in male infants. As these male infants grow into childhood and adolescence, however, the hazardous types of boyish play in which they take part may involve eye accidents with a consequent loss of vision. Throughout the early years

girls, on the contrary, are more sheltered. During the height of the employable years, blindness was seen oftener in males where it exceeded females by 20 per cent. At this time in life men are exposed to the dangerous experiences of life, whereas women seldom face the same risks. We find, though, that blindness dominated in women who were over the 65 year group. This is understandable. Their span of life exceeds that of men and the degenerative processes of old age, which assert themselves in these years, are frequently accompanied by loss of sight.

Diagnosis and causes of blindness

Among the eye diagnoses causing blindness, cataract ranked highest. Diseases of the choroid and retina were the next heaviest contributors, followed closely by glaucoma.

In the 5,051 cases studied, cataracts were responsible for loss of sight in 1,220 people. This condition, found primarily among older people, is a clouding of the lens, rather than a growth as many people are prone to think of it. Yet the disease can be found in any age where degenerative processes have taken place, even though the person is not actually of advanced years.

The figures showed a sharp increase in the incidence of cataract after 17 years of age, with the development of 1,031 cases after 50 years of age. For the majority of cataracts, amounting to 955 cases, the causative factor was not known. General disease, said to be responsible for 133 cases, stood first among the known causes of cataract.

Diseases of the choroid and retina, the second highest cause of blindness, affect the internal, sensitive structures of the eye. Of the 1,177 cases, falling largely within the age group of 40 to 60 years, 568 were due to general diseases. Among those whose visual loss was due to glaucoma, 490 women were affected in contrast to 428 men. The Study confirmed the fact that glaucoma is a disease of middle life. It was found in only 86 persons under 50 years of age, which leaves approximately 90 per cent of all glaucoma reported in the older age group.

Retrolental fibroplasia must be mentioned since its incidence is increasing. In New York State, 54 cases were reported during the given three year period. This disease, common to premature infants, is an important cause of blindness. Today many research projects are being conducted in an effort to find its cause and thereby its prevention.

Since we know that the well-being of the eye is associated with the state of general health, it is essential to mention the causative agents of the 5,051 cases of blindness studied. In over half of the cases reported they were medically undetermined. Prenatal factors, including those of hereditary and prenatal origin, were stated in 556 instances. Diabetes, still a great offender, was the cause of 443 cases of blindness. Infectious diseases, as meningitis, septicemia, and syphilis, proved to be among the lesser of the causes. Only 377 cases were attributed to these infections. Accidents, too, were found to be in the minority as causes of blindness; only 199 cases were reported as the result of trauma during this three-year period. It must be remembered that an injury to only one eye is not necessarily referred to the Commission for the Blind. Hence, obviously all of the eye accidents are not included in this Study.

Marital status — Figures on marital status were incomplete. From the information received, we know that only 21 per cent of the blind were single; 32 per cent were married or had been married at some time. The status of the remaining 36 per cent was unknown. Of the 809 who have lost their spouse, it is interesting to note that 70 per cent of the survivors were females.

Are the blind employed — In analyzing employability of the blind, all those under 18 and over 65 years of age were considered as not eligible for employment. This shows that about 650 people were actually employable. Of this number 171 were employed. As one would suspect, males constituted about 80 per cent of the employed. The 489 blind people who would be classed as unemployed, no doubt include a large number of housewives not seeking work opportunities.

Other handicaps — About 36 per cent of the blind were additionally handicapped. We found 499 people confined to mental institutions; 135 reported as having a hearing disability; 9, a speech defect; and 1,217 were known to have physical disorders.

Blindness in old age — It is an accepted fact that the life span is now longer than ever before. With old age comes degeneration, found not only in the body but also in the eyes. Among the aged, senile cataracts present a definite problem. Added to visual impairment is the dread and fear of operative measures. Contrary to popular opinion, the surgical removal of a cataract should not be rejected solely on the basis of advanced years. Sight has been restored to countless persons who have followed ophthalmological advice and have undergone this type of operation. Nevertheless, one must remember that surgery cannot improve every case. Systemic factors, as well as eye complications, must be considered in determining operative risks.

A comment — Blindness as shown in this Survey, occurs in all ages and in all walks of life. Even so it need not be an unsurmountable barrier. It is true that special services may be required in adjustment to the handicap. Yet with only certain restrictions, the blind can lead normal, useful lives and take their places as valued members of society.